Theories and Concepts for Understanding Children's Digital Lives: An Annotated Bibliography

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This annotated bibliography provides a roadmap for understanding nine key areas of children's digital lives. It has been designed for researchers and research users and provides essential and supplementary texts on each of the areas.

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Key areas of children's digital lives

Children and young people
The child, children, young people
Development and evolving capacity
Structures and cultures of childhood
Diversity and difference

Digital environment
Technology and affordances
Uses, users and domestication
Normative values in design
Innovation, datafication and AI

Access
Place and time of access
In/equality and in/exclusion
Fixed, mobile and wearable
Transcending on/offline

Opportunities and benefits
Internet engagement
Engagement and participation
Information and exploration
Play, creativity, fun

Skills and literacies
Learning and information skills
Digital skills and competencies
Data literacy and e-Safety
Civic and other literacies

Risk and harm
Content, contact, conduct, contract
Familiar and emerging risks
Cross-cutting risks including privacy
Relation between risk and harm

Health and wellbeing
Digital wellbeing and health
Mental ill health and anxiety
Resilience and coping
Vulnerability

Social support
Parental mediation
Socialisation, family and school
Sociality and peer support
Professional help services

Policy and regulation
Children's rights in the digital age
Law, policy and regulation
Agency, voice and activism
Responses to emerging challenges

The socialising agents that support and mediate children's digital experiences and outcomes can be theorised in multiple ways. Most research focuses on the role of parents and the family, with theories of parental mediation commonly drawn on in positioning the child, and their digital activities, in an interpersonal context. However, the nature and role of the family, particularly parents, can be contentious, and these can be debated in terms of their description, normative expectations (and critiques thereof) and their historical and cultural specificities and shaping.

Receiving less attention, but also important, are efforts to theorise the importance of peer and community mediation for children's digital engagement. A distinct and sizeable research literature addresses the role of school, although this is little represented here.

Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1998). [On the way to a post-familial family from a community of need to elective affinities](). *Theory, Culture & Society*, 15(3-4), 53–70.

Beck-Gernsheim describes the 'post-familial family' – painful experiences and the hopes of the family in late modernity in the West, where reflexivity, risk and individualisation have reconfigured the possibilities, pressures and burdens of the family.

Baumrind, D. (1971). [Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology*](), 4(1), 1–103.

This is the classic analysis of parental mediation, often since applied to parental mediation of television, the internet and other media, but originally developed as a characterisation of diverse family relations. Baumrind analyses parenting in terms of independent dimensions of authority (or control) or warmth, famously demonstrating that authoritative (control and warmth) parenting results in better family relationships and outcomes for children than authoritarian (control but no warmth) relationships.

Beck, U. (1997). [Democratization of the family.]() *Childhood*, 4(2), 151–168.

Beck looks at changes in personal and family life – youth as a 'form and avant garde of one's own life' (p. 161). Children have received new rights to a self-determined life, and states serve as advocates of children.

Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995). [*The Normal Chaos of Love.*]() Polity Press.

This book describes important transformations in intimacy and personal life in post-modern societies, and how children take a new role within family life. It explores individualisation, free choice and a greater focus on love.

🔓 **Beyens, P. Valkenburg, M. and Piotrowski, J.T. (2019). [Developmental trajectories of parental mediation across early and middle childhood.]() *Human Communication Research*, 45(2), 226–250.**

This article reviews research on parental mediation to theorise how and why it varies across the developmental trajectory of childhood.

Clark, L.S. (2011). [Parental mediation theory for the digital age](#). *Communication Theory*, 21(4), 323–343.

This article reviews parental mediation theory, proposing an approach that goes beyond positivistic and linear approaches, accounting for the emotional labour that managing children's media use causes, as well as the reciprocal asymmetry in the parent–child relationship, going beyond the digital native/immigrant dichotomy.

Epstein, J.L. (2010). [School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share](#). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(3), 81–96.

This article discusses (although not in the context of children online) six different types of school–family–community partnership models for caring for children. This is highly cited work on the different partnership models between school and homes when caring for children. It would also be helpful to understand these models of involvement when considering how to address challenges towards children's online safety, privacy and security.

🔓   **Friedman, A. (2016). Three-year-old photographers: Educational mediation as a basis for visual literacy via digital photography in early childhood**. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 8(1), 15–31.

This study responds to an ever-changing digital environment by suggesting that parental mediation theory be redefined. Friedman brings into discussion the fields of media literacy and parental mediation.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Polity Press, in association with Basil Blackwell.

Giddens' wide-ranging and influential sociological theory introduces the concepts of structure and agency, and their dynamic interdependencies (theorised as 'structuration'). Albeit without a direct focus on childhood, it is insightful for its understanding the relationships between social institutions and people's (including children's) agency in determining their daily lives and life outcomes.

Gittlins, D. (1993). *[The Family in Question: Changing Households and Familiar Ideologies](#)*. Macmillan.

With rising illegitimacy and the moral panic over child sexual abuse, Gittlins describes the family as more of a political issue than ever. The book discusses if it is 'the family' that is in crisis, or the subject of family ideology.

Goodman, I.R. (1983). [Television's role in family interaction: A family systems perspective.](#) *Journal of Family Issues*, 4(2), 405–424.

This article is a still-insightful account of the psychodynamics of family systems, to explain the processes of meaning-making, identity, relationships and power within the family and within the home.

Hobson, B. (ed.) (2002). *[Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood](#)*. Cambridge University Press.

Hobson discusses cross-country differences of welfare regimes, the cash and care facets of fatherhood, child support and custody, parental leave and masculinities. He theorises fatherhood (as ideology), conditions for fathering (as practice) and experiences of fathers (as individuals).

Hoover, S., Clark, L.S. & Alters, D. (2004). *Media, Home and Family.* **Routledge.**

The book presents the process of developing a theory of media, home and family based on constructivist methods, followed by a characterisation of the US context and five case studies.

Iqbal, S., Zakar, R. & Fischer, F. (2021). Extended theoretical framework of parental internet mediation: Use of multiple theoretical stances for understanding socio-ecological predictors. *Frontiers in Psychology***, 12, 620838.**

This article is useful for its review of the core theorists of parental mediation. The authors subsequently propose an extended framework of socio-ecological predictors concerning parental internet mediation.

James, A. (ed.) (2013). *Socialising Children.* **Palgrave Macmillan.**

From the perspective of the new sociology of childhood, James offers a socio-cultural account of childhood socialisation that focuses on culture, power and inequality in family relations and outcomes.

Jensen, A.-M. (2011). Pluralization of Family Forms. In J. Qvortrup, W.A. Corsaro & M.-S. Honig (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* **(pp. 140–155). Palgrave Macmillan.**

Jensen outlines a host of new family forms, as opposed to the married child-bearing couple, and how this affects children. Children (and marriage) no longer bring social prestige, hence they are postponed.

Kalmus, V. (2012). Making Sense of the Social Mediation of Children's Internet Use: Perspectives for Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Research. In C.W. Wijnen, S. Trültzsch & C. Ortner (eds) *Medienwelten im Wandel: Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Positionen, Perspektiven und Konsequenzen. Festschrift für Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink* **(pp. 137–149). Springer.**

This theoretically oriented chapter conceptualises social mediation by suggesting a typology of the roles of the agents of socialisation as mediators. It then outlines some methodological considerations, and sketches possible perspectives for further interdisciplinary research.

Kalmus, V. & Roosalu, T. (2012). Institutional Filters on Children's Internet Use: An Additional Explanation of Cross-National Differences in Parental Mediation. In M. Walrave, W. Heirman, S. Mels, C. Timmerman & H. Vandebosch (eds) *e-Youth: Balancing between Opportunities and Risks* **(pp. 235–250). Peter Lang.**

This analysis highlights the importance of macro-level factors (such as welfare regimes and gender ideologies) in explaining cross-cultural differences in parental mediation.

Lauricella, A.R., Cingel, D.P., Beaudoin-Ryan, L., Robb, M.B., Saphir, M. & Wartella, E.A. (2016). *The Common Sense Census: Plugged-in Parents of Tweens and Teens***. Common Sense Media.**

This contribution is based on focus groups and nationally representative survey data, and differentiates between parental mediation, parental monitoring and parental management, reporting on findings focusing on these three areas of social mediation.

🔓 **Lee, E., Bristow, J., Faircloth, C. & Macvarish, J. (2014).** *Parenting Culture Studies*. **Palgrave Macmillan.**

This edited volume offers a contemporary account from a critical social science perspective of 'parenting' and 'parenting culture'. While attentive to empirical research and the voices of parents, the contributors' critical analysis recognises that parenting is subject to powerful moral and media panics, generating parenting and public anxiety, and compounding the problems that parents face in their daily lives.

🔓 **Lim, S.S. (2018). Transcendent Parenting in Digitally Connected Families: When the Technological Meets the Social. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte & A. Jorge (eds)** *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age* **(pp 31–39). Nordicom.**

Lim talks about transcendent parenting as a new type of parenting. A transcendent parent is someone who is always online, who remains connected to his/her child even when apart. This trend is supported by various digital tools the parents can utilise in their parenting routines (for example, location-tracking apps and online parenting groups).

🔓 **Livingstone, S. & Bober, M. (2013). Regulating the Internet at Home: Contrasting the Perspectives of Children and Parents. In D. Buckingham & R. Willett (eds)** *Digital Generations* **(pp. 105–126). Routledge.**

This chapter discusses 'parental strategies of domestic regulation' of children's internet access from the results of the UK Children Go Online project. It presents parental perspectives towards regulating, and monitoring, children's internet use.

🔓 **Mascheroni, G., Ponte, C. & Jorge, A. (2018). Introduction. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte & A. Jorge (eds)** *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age* **(pp. 9–16). Nordicom.**

This chapter introduces the concept of digital parenting, which refers to various relationships the parents have with digital technologies in the context of child rearing. On the one hand, the idea involves various practices the parents have adopted to mediate their children's media use, and on the other, it refers to the ways the parents themselves use digital technologies in their daily lives and in being a parent.

🔓 **Mendoza, K. (2013). Surveying parental mediation: Connections, challenges and questions for media literacy.** *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, **1(1), 28–41.**

This is another article that provides an overview of parental mediation theory and practice, in order to present new questions for the field of media literacy.

Morgan, D. (1999). Risk and Family Practices: Accounting for Change and Fluidity in Family Life. In E. Silva & C. Smart (eds) *The New Family* **(pp. 13–30). SAGE Publications.**

This chapter looks at changes in family life – family as based on practices and something that can be chosen rather than granted. It talks about 'doing family' as a way of describing diversity within family forms.

🔓 **Schofield Clark, L. & Brites, M.J. (2018). Differing Parental Approaches to Cultivating Youth Citizenship. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte & A. Jorge (eds)** *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age* **(pp. 81–89). Nordicom.**

In this chapter, the authors reflect on how parents and their children negotiate their digital responsibilities and rights during the adolescent years in light of their expectations regarding agentive involvement in life decision-making. It highlights the stories of families who embrace a commitment to social justice, and who therefore view the digital activities of their children and youth as a question of whether or not these activities support the family's broader commitments to social justice and active civic engagement. The authors argue that young people may come to view practices of citizenship as an extension of their online and offline experience of agency within their home contexts.

Siibak, A. (2019). Digital Parenting and the Datafied Child. In T. Burns & F. Gottschalk (eds) *Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-Being in the Digital Age* **(pp. 103–118). OECD Publishing.**

Siibak considers 'intimate dataveillance', a term that refers to the use of tracking apps and devices. As there are so many new risks children may face in their online and offline encounters, parents have increasingly started to make use of various technological devices, mobile applications or parental controls (for example, content filtering software, internet blockers and add-on monitoring software) for monitoring children's whereabouts, both in the online and offline worlds.

Stephen, C., Stevenson, O. & Adey, C. (2013). Young children engaging with technologies at home: The influence of family context. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, **11, 149–164.**

The authors examine dimensions of the home environment that influence a child's digital experience; influencing dimensions of the home environment (especially parental attitudes) may be the way towards healthier experience and use of digital devices.

🔓 **Wartella, E.A. & Jennings, N. (2000). Children and computers: New technology – old concerns.** *The Future of Children*, **10(2), 31-43.**

This article reports on historical trends in social concerns about the disruptive effects of media use and how society and policy/regulations have always put particular emphasis on parents, leaving them with the burden of socialising and educating their children to a socially acceptable use of technology.

Wells, K. (2015). *Childhood in a Global Perspective* **(2nd edn). Polity Press.**

Children's lives throughout the world are the focus of this book. Wells shows how the notion of childhood is being radically reshaped, in part as a consequence of globalisation. The book tackles issues such as children's rights, the family, children and war, child labour, migration, trafficking, the role of play, and young people's activism around the globe.